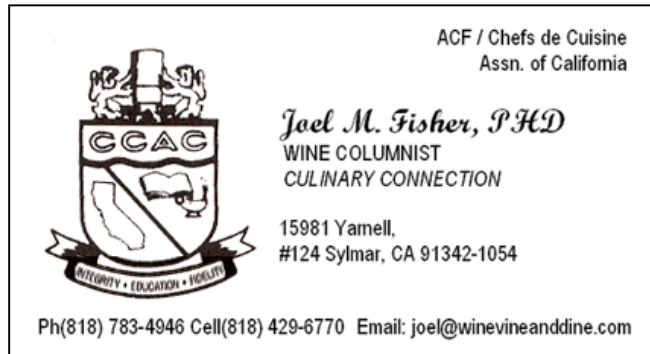


## FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY [JOEL M. FISHER](#)



June/July 2005

I've been haunted by an idea for a while now.

I can pin it partly on Hollywood. First there was last year's "Sideways" with its anti-Merlot diatribe. Then there was the documentary "[Mondovino](#)," which looks at the phenomenon of globalization and how wine enthusiasts around the globe are drinking fewer varietals.

Bill Gotti's and my own [WINEVINEANDDINE](#) events of the last year are also responsible. We've been creating region-centric wine dinners that hopscotch through parts of Spain, Greece and Italy. As we planned the events, I became increasingly aware that our favorite bottles were not major varietals, but rather increasingly available indigenous offerings. I felt that pairing native wines with native cuisines added extra dimension – and enjoyment – to the experience.

I think a strong case can be made for fighting against the globalization of wine. Just as many local cultures mourn the onslaught of mainstream Western pop-culture, I too would mourn the loss of local wine specialties. While not every bottle is noteworthy or even interesting, to squeeze them entirely out of the export market would be a shame. Variety – and varietals – is the spice of life.

With this crusade in mind, I want to share some of my favorite regional offerings that I discovered recently.

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Let's start in Greece. We recently explored that country's wines and cuisine at a [WINEVINEANDDINE](#) event held at [Joseph's Café](#), a Greek-Middle Eastern establishment in Hollywood owned by Robert Abrahamian.

The reception kicked off with an [Athiri](#), an old Grecian white varietal that originated on the [Aegean islands](#). It's often used in blends, but when used alone these grapes produce impressive dry white or subtly sweet sparkling wines with light bouquets. That night we drank a gently sparkling white not dissimilar to champagne. We next sipped a [Hatziviannis](#), a citrusy white with the bite of green grapes and minerals. It paired nicely with pickled calamari. We then transitioned to reds with an [Agioritikos](#), a grape that

comes from Peloponnesus. Wines using this varietal tend to vary wildly in style and quality, but let's not blame the grape. The bottle we sampled was a big, surprisingly smooth red that complimented the Sagnaki cheese appetizer nicely.

Some of the night's most appealing wines were blends of mainstream international varietals and native Greek grapes. Two such blends were the [Merlot Xinomavro](#) and the [Cabernet Limnio](#). The Xinomavro has been described as the noblest of Greek red varieties. It's cultivated mainly in Northern Greece, and shows significant diversity based on its growing conditions. This varietal often gets blended, and can produce everything from a dry red to a semi-sweet rose. The blend we sipped while nibbling a spinach-and-mushroom salad was velvety like a Merlot, but lighter on the tongue. The hardy Limnio grape, which originated on the Aegean Islands, doesn't enjoy the international respect that some of its brethren do. This vine tends to produce herbaceous wines, and the Cabernet blend we drank was no exception. But the end result was similar to a Super Cab, and it held up well against lamb chops.

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Next we swing over to that other ancient empire, Italy. Tuscany, to be exact. Near Siena lies the medieval hill-town of San Gimignano, which is famous for its faintly effervescent white wine, [Vernaccia di San Gimignano](#). This crisp, clean white is a summertime favorite for Tuscans, and locals take deep pride in their famous wine. The Vernaccia varietal is ancient, and wine experts have traced its history back as far to 1200 A.D. In the 1960s it was the first wine to be awarded the appellation Denominazione di Origine Controllata, and to this day remains the only Tuscan D.O.C.G wine.

A bit to the south of San Gimignano lies Tuscany's red wine country. Although Montepulciano is often overlooked for the superior reds coming from neighboring hill-town Montalcino, the intense and long-lived [Vino Nobile di Montepulciano](#) is a worthy favorite. For this discovery, the wine world owes thanks to pioneering producer Ettore Falvo, who took up the cause of [Vin Nobile](#) on the world wine market in the late 1970's. The big red nicely balanced out a rich polenta dish with porcini mushrooms and truffle fondue.

No wine excursion to Tuscany would be complete without the region's beloved [Vin Santo](#), a golden dessert wine on a par with Sauternes. It can be enjoyed dry or sweet, and it's practically a crime not to dunk traditional crunchy almond cookies while sipping the evening away.

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The region of Friuli was the next to catch our attention. Known for producing superb Italian whites, we found that the traditional [Tocai Friulano](#), [Picolit](#), [Robolie](#) and [Verduzzo](#) varieties presented great range and excellent flavors. The Tocai Friulano was a particularly successful reception wine, with just the crisp floral notes needed to start off a lovely evening. From the reds we favored the [Schioppettino](#) and [Refosco](#). The Refosco – a peppery red with deep color and structure – paired nicely with a spicy arugula, pear and Gorgonzola salad.

To the south of Friuli lies Campania. At an event held at [Panzanella](#) in Sherman Oaks, we shared a handful of bottles that came from particularly ancient grape types. The [Falanghina Feudi di San Gregorio](#) comes from the historic white Falanghina varietal. This wine boasts long acidity and a ripe fruit finish, which kicked the evening off nicely. The dry, crisp [Greco di Tufo](#) balanced out the saltiness of miniature anchovy pizzas. (Our dinner-goers commented on how refreshing the utter lack of oak was.) A stuffed calamari salad was paired with the honeyed fruit of a [Fiano di Avellino Radici](#) to interesting affect. [Aglianico Serpico Feudi di San Gregorio](#) was the biggest hit of the evening. Staggeringly rich, with berries, cloves and chocolate on the palate, this decadent wine was perfect with an equally rich Mediterranean striped sea bass. We moved on to a [Taurasi](#), which also comes from the historic [Aglianico grape](#). (With its documented 2000-year history, this varietal has a better pedigree than most of us.) This well-structured and full-bodied wine is dry to the point of being austere, but with nice floral tones.

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Finally, we swing across the Mediterranean over to Spain. A favorite grape of the country is [Tempranillo](#), which Crusaders are thought to have introduced to Spanish soil. The Tempranillo grape is deep in color but short in acidity and longevity, so tends to do better in blends. Another notable red varietal used well in blends – but this one a true Spanish native – is the [Garnacha](#), which deserves credit as the originator of the French Grenache. Garnacha grapes have a fruity, sweet flavor and produce very big reds. For notable local whites, check out the once nearly extinct [Albarino](#). These grapes produce intensely fresh, floral yet dry whites that could be loosely compared to a German Riesling or a French Viognier. The [Rias Baixas](#) appellation in Spain's Galicia region is dominated by superb Albarinos.

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There are so many indigenous varietals from so many regions around the world that the ones I mentioned here are just a tantalizing taste. My main hope is that this column opens you up to trying unfamiliar varietals. While the names may be new to you, odds are the grapes may come from some of the oldest areas in the world – including the fertile soil of Egypt, the cradle of civilization.

So be open to experimentation. Stray from the familiar Chardonnays and Syrahs, and look for a Primitivo from Italy. Try a Greek wine that you can't pronounce. Just try. Even if you don't like that particular bottle, you won't be disappointed. Enjoy!

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